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MENTAL HYGIENE
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BY

ALICE KATHARINE FALLOWS

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MENTAL HYGIENE IN EVERYDAY LIVING

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"YOU must be made of iron!" a friend said, half enviously, once to a prominent educator who has to her credit a series of achievements requiring great energy, nerve force, and application.

"I'm not," she replied. "But I have learned to use every ounce of my strength to the best advantage. When I have something on hand that requires all my powers — teaching a difficult class, writing an important article, facing a great audience, whatever it is, I never screw up my courage and my nerves to the sticking-point. I simply relax and decide that the thing I must do is quite

within my limits. I make my preparation thoroughly, but I go about it quietly and calmly, and when the time comes I meet it in the same relaxed, confident spirit. Moreover, I never worry. On this way of working hangs the law of health and efficient living, for me at least."

Quite unconsciously, she was illustrating in a very capable life the value of mental hygiene. Mental hygiene, systematically applied, helps nervous sufferers back to health, makes the timid courageous, teaches the lazy to work, cheers the hopeless, and gives more power to the industrious. Yet this mental hygiene, or mind-training, or psychotherapy is nothing more and nothing less than common sense made authoritative in everyday life.

A young woman who had been to several

noted European physicians, and who had exhausted the resources of one or two famous doctors of her own country, had got to the hopeless point, from which one glides into confirmed pessimism and melancholy. Mentally and physically she seemed unfit for any exertion. She ate little and slept less, and had no spark of interest in work or play. People tired her inexpressibly. Her home surroundings were far from congenial, and she had several very insistent troubles to worry about. At this point she was put through a course of mental hygiene. Her competent, vigorous director literally pulled her out of her old thought-ruts, and into new paths of interest. She was almost coerced at first into changing her point of view and her very ideals. So strong was the director's personality and so apt was the pupil when

she once began to understand the improvement she was making, that in a few weeks, without any change of surroundings or any lessening of her worries, she was on her feet, better than she had been for years, sleeping well, eating well, enjoying her friends, and getting ready to do her chosen work. Her restoration was nothing mysterious, only the correction of bad mental habits and a rational training in good ones, plus the obedience to sound physical hygiene, which thorough mental hygiene always includes.

The majority of us, fortunately, are not in the desperate plight of this young woman; but in the interests of efficiency and more comfortable living we can practise the orderly regulation of our lives to great advantage. With the present hue and cry about the nervousness of the age, some such antidote

was due in the course of civilization. These are the days when a multitude of nervous disorders that our great-grandmothers never even knew the names of are making life hideous for thousands of victims. We shake our pessimistic heads and say: "Oh, it is this strenuous pace. We live too fast. We experience too intensely. We burn more fuel than we have, and these nervous disturbances are nature's revenge."

Quite true! But the fact remains that we are not our unhurried grandmothers, living leisurely "bromidic" lives. We are ourselves, in a century full of pulsing, vigorous, surging life, with five-day steamers bridging the ocean, chugging autos on land whisking us over our vacation miles, and flying-machines threatening perfection at every moment. It is a splendid age to be a part

of. Moreover, we have no option. For better or worse, here we are to stay. We cannot view life from the confines of a tub like the wise Diogenes, nor turn back time to the quieter days of our grandmothers. What can we do, then? "Teach your ignorant nervous systems to adapt themselves to the new conditions," answers psychotherapy. "Master your circumstances by getting into harmony with them."

This is rather an affront to our preconceived notions of the relation of things. As a nation, with fatalistic acquiescence we have taken our nervous diseases as the inevitable corollary of our intense American temperament. Now we find that the intensity and the result are both preventable. As individuals, too, how convenient we have found it to hide behind our temperaments.

I have never forgotten the remark of a little woman I met once in a Nova-Scotian village. She was sick and miserable and broken down. She fumed and fussed and fretted over her troubles every weekday, and double for Sunday. I ventured to suggest very mildly one day that perhaps she would be better if she did not worry quite so much. She turned on me with indignation. "How can I help it?" she asked. "It's my nature to worry. If I had n't my own affairs to worry about, I should worry about my neighbors'."

Most of us are not so frankly ingenuous in expressing our convictions. But how many times in much more subtle ways have we blamed Nature for our own shortcomings! When we have been laid low by a tilt with some foolish Don Quixote windmill, how often have we said to ourselves, if not

aloud: "Well, I could n't help it; it 's natural for me to go into what I am doing heels over head, heart and soul. I *must* work that way." When we have mental hysterics over an untidy maid or a disorderly family, we take great comfort in thinking, "Of course it 's my New England inheritance that makes me hate dirt and dust so. I simply cannot stand it." Again, we cut loose from the practical concerns of life, forget our business obligations, our plain responsibilities, and our meals. Then when the inevitable happens and some one has to do double work because we have shirked, we sigh deeply and murmur, "Alas! it 's my artistic temperament!" Not being angels, we can see our limitations; not being prigs, we like to excuse them. Saddling them on nature is the way most flattering to us, so we do it. But

psychotherapy, or plain suggestion, says, "Rid yourself of your limitations by surmounting them."

We are asked to believe, then, that we can modify our temperaments, that we can eliminate their faults and cultivate their virtues. Belonging to a certain type, that is, we can learn what the laws of harmony are for us, and having learned, we can live without struggle, happily and healthfully. Just why this serenity is such a good ideal, we do not always know. We need the enlightening wisdom of a medical Daniel to tell us that fight and fuss and worry in our own mind cause many of our nervous disorders. A Wall Street broker in the recent panic, when he saw his fortune to the last dollar slipping out of existence, said, cheerfully, "Well, I began with a shoe-string once. I can do it

again." If we could all meet our emergencies in such a spirit the nerve specialists would have few patients. But most of us must acquire by patient practice an attitude even approaching such a joyful indifference to misfortune. Neither is it the great crises that are always hardest to meet. We, too, can bear them sometimes with a fortitude that is not far short of heroism. It is the little, petty, nagging things that tease us and wear us out.

A friend of mine had a very hot temper, which she could not indulge without severe nervous disturbance afterwards. Learning something of the effect of emotion on the body, she decided that it was not only immoral but destructive to health to give way to her temper, and she straightway set about reform. Soon afterwards, for a very

particular wedding she ordered a new gown. The dressmaker promised to deliver it on time. She did. She sent it at the last moment to the train *half finished*. Ordinarily there would have been an explosion which would have spoiled the day for my friend and every one with her. But this time, instead, she sought a corner of the stateroom and throughout the journey tranquilly put in stitches where they would count most. When she reached her destination she was basted into her gown, and instead of suffering tortures with a nervous headache as a result of her usual worrying and fretting, enjoyed the wedding as much as any guest there. She could not break up her habit of quick temper without many lapses, but each victory made the next a little easier. Hers was not a showy

conquest, it is true, but her self-control meant happier living for an entire family; and if anyone ever deserved a wreath of laurel, it seemed to me that even for that one victory it should have been awarded to her.

The way we take the small things of life, the impression we let them make on us, counts greatly for health or against it. An admonitory quotation of childish days tells how "for lack of a nail the shoe was lost, for lack of a shoe the horse was lost, for lack of a horse the rider was lost, for lack of the rider an army was lost, for lack of an army a kingdom was lost, and all for the lack of a horse-shoe nail." Back somewhere in our history, at some small vexation, perhaps, we lost our nervous balance. Again we lost it, and again, and again, each

time more easily and more completely than before. We yielded to anger, or worry, or annoyance, or sorrow. We were ignorant, innocent enough in our intention. But nervous irritability set in, then nervous fatigue. They ate into our vitality. Less and less could we stand things. Then one day came a heavy strain, or perhaps only some small extra exaction, as the last straw. Crash went our nervous machinery. To the four winds went comfort and peace of mind, not only for ourselves, alas! but for every one within our family circle. The old story! All this accumulated suffering because, at the very beginning, when self-control would have been so easy, we did not know enough to practise it.

Not superstition, but medical science, traces an origin like this for many of our

nervous shipwrecks. There is something very stimulating and tonic, too, in such a view of the catastrophe. A succession of wrong mental states has caused the disease, but just because of that we can do the evil charm backward, as it were, and by a succession of right mental states regain our nervous health. Often the process is tedious. In the early stages of a severe breakdown, lost in a maze of strange sensations and astonishing symptoms, the nervous patient can do little but have faith in time, a doctor that understands medical mind-training, and Providence, who gives a morning of joy for the night of weeping. However wearisome the way, be not discouraged, and the end is sure — a better, happier, more efficient method of living than ever before.

Sometimes the action of psychotherapeutics is like sudden conversion. A woman of thirty-one, naturally a most vivacious, charming person, after various severe trials, including a reprehensible husband, went to pieces nervously. For nine years she was a wretched, helpless invalid; then she came into the care of a French physician, Dr. Du Bois. When he saw her first she had been in bed for months, unable to walk. On account of terrible pain in her eyes, she could neither read nor write. All daylight was shut out of the room. Even the mirrors were removed, because she could not endure their glitter. She was swathed in flannels, and her head was wrapped in a shawl in spite of the heat of a day in mid-June. Her trouble, according to the doctor's diagnosis, fell among the nervous

diseases, which are best reached through the mind. Without drugs, using simply explanations and suggestions that appealed to the reason of his patient, in three days he had her reading and writing letters and walking about a well-lighted room with mirrors on the wall. In a very short time she was taking a normal amount of exercise, leading a busy, healthful life, and reading books on philosophy that required strenuous mental effort.

Other cases of this variety of cure are reported by physicians and by the church clinics, where nervous sufferers are treated in connection with the far-reaching effort to unite religion, medicine, and psychology for the relief of nervous disorders. But often the cure must be more gradual. It is a process of reëducation. Dislodging

wrong convictions and substituting right ones takes time. No nervous patient need be discouraged who sees even a slight gain by the method of mental self-training. The world is in miniature, it may be, for the sick one, centring about a bed, an easy chair, and an insignificant daily walk. But if the little life is lived well, it fits one for the larger life of health. "Learning to take a cold bath in the morning," Dr. Barker of Johns Hopkins says, "or a wet pack at night with good grace, or to eat varieties of food to which one is disinclined, may be early lessons in will gymnastics." A denied visit of a friend gives as good an opportunity to practise resignation at one time as the loss of a trip to Europe might at another. With pain and incapacity shutting us away from active life for awhile, we may

still, as Emily Dickinson suggests, "play at paste till qualified for pearl," and learn "pearl tactics practising sand."

It is in functional nervous diseases, with all their various modifications, that mental hygiene is most valuable. Perhaps you know by experience what functional means, though even physicians find difficulty in defining it. Perhaps sometime after a broken night, when you felt so wretchedly ill that you were ready to drop; when you were so blue without any cause that you seemed to yourself Job, Hamlet, and Schopenhauer rolled into one — you went to a doctor for advice, and he said to you: "You are just as sound as a nut. There is absolutely nothing the matter with you organically. There is n't a thing in the drug-store that will help you." Perhaps it seemed to you like a life sentence to purgatory, and

you wished you could crawl off into a corner somewhere, and just die off quietly. Under the old method, even if you were given physical treatment, or sent off for a change, there was no attempt to ease directly the tormenting thoughts which made the real misery of your condition. Now the method of treatment is very different. Whatever else the up-to-date nerve specialist may or may not do for you, he tries to set the current of your thoughts healthward, and to send you away with the hope that along that road comfort and strength are waiting for you.

A functional nervous disease puts your mental world out of joint, to be sure; but in it the nervous tissue is not involved. For practical purposes, that is all a layman needs to know. Functional nervous diseases in the extreme form mow down our overstrained

relatives, strew our social and business way with breakdowns, and fill rest-cures and sanatoriums. It is a touch of functional disorder that takes the pleasure out of wholesome work and sometimes blackens all the daily pages of a year. How many people, apparently well, are enduring discomfort like this silently, it is impossible to know. But it is the condition most favorable to the development of nervous catastrophe in some form. If the flavor has gone out of things, if you cannot catch happiness, if you are out of tune with yourself or with your world, for the sake of every one concerned take yourself in hand quickly. Begin to practise mental hygiene and learn through its teaching what a beautiful place this old world is to live in and to work in, when you know how to obey the laws of health.

While it is true that for a good while physicians have been exercising control of a kind over the minds as well as the bodies of their patients, only recently has it been done systematically and consciously on the basis of experiments made by psychologists and men of science. The evolution of this system to teach the mind control of the body is an interesting movement from superstition to reason. The faint beginning of it can probably be traced back to the "medicine-man" of the savage tribes. His gyrations and incantations affecting only the mind, or what passed for a mind, in our progenitors must have been effective in many cases. Otherwise this primitive doctor would very soon have been served up as a meal to his infuriated brethren, and the "medicine-man" as an institution would have died an unnatural

death. Much later, in a far different state of civilization, mesmerism cropped up, and many people were undoubtedly cured by suggestion under the name of mesmerism. Mesmerism rationalized, with the nonsense deducted, became hypnotism; and hypnotism, in the hands of prominent French and German physicians, grew to be an important factor in the treatment of certain nervous diseases. By hypnotism, suggestions made in a state of sleep, to counteract pain and wrong habits, are obeyed in the natural waking state by the patient, with no recollection of their origin. The habitual drinker finds his favorite drink not only distasteful, but positively nauseating, after a hypnotic suggestion. A woman loses her headache and the various nervous pains that have tormented her. Another, dreading a hard

siege in the dentist's chair, is told that she will feel no pain. Obeying the hypnotic suggestion, she goes through the experience with almost a sense of pleasure. By further experimenting, progressive doctors have found that, except in extreme cases, suggestions made to patients in an expectant, unresisting mood act as well as hypnotic suggestions and have the added benefit of being worked out by the patient consciously. Now, except in extreme cases, hypnotism is almost discarded, and the emphasis is put on persuasion, education, and reëducation, the correction of bad habits and the formation of new ones, — character-building, in short, which after all is the alpha and omega of mental hygiene.

The principle behind this form of treatment is by no means new. It is older than

the reply made by Epictetus the slave, some two thousand years ago, to the question, "Who is free?" "The man who masters his own self," he said. It is at least as old as the proverb that tells us: "He that ruleth his spirit is better than he that taketh a city." Truths like these we have probably granted all our lives, with as little thought of their having a place in our working philosophy as the nebular hypothesis or the binomial theorem. It has remained for modern science and psychology, touching these principles with the wand of their experimental knowledge, to show us the whys and wherefores of these age-old truths, to teach us not only how they can cure our nervous ills, but how they can make the little homely round of our daily life, between sun-up and sun-down, happier and more efficient.

The lesson begins with the little things. Those break us down and those build us up.

If we are millionaires in nervous energy, we can, perhaps, use the strength to move a mountain, and not suffer. But most of us, having only a limited amount of nervous force, must learn how to meet little things easily. Women who live at high nervous pressure are the ones most in need of the gospel of relaxation. This is a very large class. For the women living at high nervous pressure may be in the city whirl, with no unengaged moment from ten o'clock one morning until two o'clock the next, or they may be farmers' wives, rising and retiring with the chickens, and seeing no human soul between daylight and supper. It is our inner attitude toward things, the amount of

emotion we spend on them, that makes them exhausting.

Worry on top of work, the psychologists say, makes us like the old man of the fable, who not only excused his donkey from carrying him, but actually bore the little beast on his own back. Worry and anger and fear, and all their kith and kin of unpleasant emotions, have been proved by experiments to have an actual physical effect on the health of the body. This is such a familiar story now, that no one would attempt to deny it.

At this point along comes some one, thinking she is a second "Lady from Philadelphia," and with a very superior air says: "If these emotions are bad for you, why don't you simply drop them?"

That is the obvious thing to do, of course;

but let her try it. Carrying these wrong habits of thought through many months and years, our mental shoulders have bowed so low to the burden that we cannot usually straighten them at once and shake off the load. We must raise them little by little, with some creaking of unused muscles. But the pleasure of release from the needless burden is worth all the effort.

By persistent practise of such little exercises as the following may the comfortable result be attained. When house-cleaning is on hand, and Dinah is snappy, and the meat does n't come, and your forgetful husband brings an unannounced guest, and you want to fly into ten thousand pieces, don't. Find the funny side. Sit down one minute and laugh about it. Then make the best of the situation, and afterwards figure

out how much nervous energy you have saved to spend on a pleasanter thing, and how much discomfort from your bad temper you have spared a really good-natured and repentant husband. Again, when the fertile Bobby, in search of occupation, makes mud pies on the front parlor rug just before the first call of your most fashionable neighbor, don't make it a tragedy ranking with bankruptcy and sudden death. Bobby must have a nice, appropriate punishment, of course, but don't draw out of your nervous bank-account for the purpose an amount of emotion that ought to last you a week. When you are in the midst of an important piece of literary work, and the Irish maid in the next apartment furnishes a continuous concert off the key, don't condemn her to everlasting torment,

but bribe her to stop, if you can. If you cannot, stuff your ears with cotton.

Some mortals blessed of the gods are so nicely balanced that they live without effort in a delightful equilibrium of mind, body, and spirit that makes work a joy, and living a pleasant procession of useful days. The rest of us — and we are the large majority — must achieve our equilibrium by efforts that make us appreciate Patrick's famous progress to heaven — two steps up and one back. The practice in self-control that makes perfect is gained from just the trifling occurrences that seem so absurdly unimportant.

But how about the deeper experiences, when "the heart knoweth its own bitterness," and disappointment and sorrow seem the daily fare? Is mental hygiene of value

then? Surely then, if ever. As a memorial of an only daughter, the dearest thing he had, a friend of mine gave a memorial fund to a college with the condition that the interest should be used each year for some girl who had worked and saved and scrimped her way through college. Each year since, the money has fallen like the gift of a fairy god-mother into some cramped life. For there is still a further condition,—that it shall be used for commencement finery and a good time. My friend has built his daughter's memorial as he wanted it; "not in bricks and mortar," he says, "but in human happiness."

Introspection and lassitude, self-centredness and selfishness, are the dangers that lie in the wake of sad happenings. But they are dangers no longer if we build the memory

of them into human happiness. Suffering has its compensation, then; so, also, have pain and weariness, and all the ills that beset us. There is no better mental hygiene and no truer Christianity than this: to build suffering into joy.

In general, an inflexible determination to meet what each hour brings efficiently and calmly, and without irritation, is the first requirement for nervous health. Next, the practice of optimism. Not the flabby optimism that blinds its eyes to realities and wears an everlasting fatuous smile, but the intelligent optimism that sees two sides to every human happening and deliberately chooses the bright one, until choice becomes a habit. This, in a nutshell, is psychotherapy, and by the application of it hundreds of nervous sufferers have won their way to health and

peace of mind. Hundreds more, if they follow the prescription, can escape breakdown altogether, and learn a happier method of living than ever before. Out of this systematic training in the little things and in the big things grows at last the trust, the "wise passivity," in meeting the hard facts of life, that is only another name for the potential energy that conquers them. When the practice of optimism has subjugated depression, and an orderly body obeys an orderly mind, there comes as a reward the buoyant hopefulness of health, the joy in mere living, that throws out its arms and "with a frolic welcome takes the sunshine and the storm."

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